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ABSTRACT

Foreign language teachers are urged to consider the interrelatedness of language and culture and the importance of making cultural instruction an integral part of their program. Reasons for teaching culture and practical suggestions for the development of resource materials, based on practical experience, are developed. The newspaper is discussed as a potential educational resource. (RL)

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DO IT YOURSELF CULTURE UNITS

or

HOW TO BRING YOUR SUMMER BACK ALIVE

As the author and compiler of two of the three AATSP Culture Units (and the photographer of the third) I naturally find it gratifying that in all three geographical districts where they are on loan they have been received with enough enthusiasm that they must be booked months ahead.* I feel, however, that while these units undoubtedly fill a need for those language teachers who are prevented by circumstances beyond their control from traveling and gathering their own cultural materials, many instructors could, with a little effort and ingenuity, prepare meterials that would do an even better job because they could be tailored to the teacher's individual talents and the needs of his particular students and courses. Are you planning to travel or study abroad this summer? Then make your time yield extra benefits by planning some cultural materials of your own. They will immediately have certain advantages over any I or anyone else could devise because (1) they will be your own --something about which you can wax enthusiastic; something about which you are knowledgeable and (2) they will not have to be presented at a possibly inconvenient time scheduled months in advance. Rather they can be presented bit by bit at a psychologically appropriate moment, in bite sizes, so to speak, instead of as an overabundant and possibly indigestible meal.

Why do we teach culture at all in language courses? The answer is obvious: it is inseparable from the language itself--the cause and the result; the chicken and the egg. We use the one to explain the other. The gesture must accompany the oral expression, and the psychological differences that prompt the gesture and create the word must be understood, absorbed, and made a part of the would-be speaker. Language is essentially a study of attitudes. It is meaningless to have two Spanish students, for example, stand stiffly facing each other, hands glued to their sides, and mechanically repeat -- Buenos días, Juan. ¿Como estás?
-- Muy bien, gracias. ¿Y tú?
This is parroting, but it is not language because the cultural element has been removed. As you can see, it is never too early to teach culture!

It is equally obvious that a lot of the fun of learning a language lies in mastery of these cultural connotations, and that an alert teacher will not overlook the opportunity such mastery offers for meaningful motivation toward greater linguistic accomplishment by making the language come alive. What may be less obvious is the strong possibility that in the all-too-frequent situation where the language sequence is not sufficiently long, the attitudes and the understandings the student developes toward the speakers of that language may, God forbid, be the only lasting result of the experience!

Culture with a capital "C" is pretty much of a thing of the past, both historically and pedagogically speaking. No longer do we expect our students to recognize all the historical monuments of Paris or recite by rote the names of the leaders of the revolutionary governments of Mexico, or know the legend of each castle on the Rhine. It is not that we are against our students' acquiring these

* See Hispania for description of the units.

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fascinating bits of information, but rather that in an educational system oriented toward relevancy (as we hope ours will become) we recognize that the chance of our students' putting this type of knowledge to immediate use is remote and that without use it will not be long retained or form a meaningful part of their educational experience.

What culture, then, do we teach? Call it anthropological if you like. By any name it is that culture which is inextricably bound to the lives of the people who speak the language--their psychological quirks, their customs, their history and art and theater and literature. Culture is not a thing apart to be taught only on Tuesdays and Thursdays from a special book for that purpose. Rather a reference to das Hermannsdenkmal in the day's conversation should send you scurrying for a picture postcard for the overhead projector or just to pass around. The mention of the Prado gives you an opening for a series of slides showing reproductions of paintings by Velázquez or Goya. Who were those terrified people before the firing squad? What war was that? When did it happen? These are the questions that should come from your students if the atmosphere is relaxed enough that they feel free to ask questions. When they ask the questions, they are interested enough to listen to the answers.

If you are time conscious and worried about what happens to language learning during these little sorties, comfort yourself with two thoughts: (1) They need not be of long duration or all-inclusive. If you can motivate a student to want to know more about a painter or a writer--or even to recognize a name the next time it is mentioned, your ten minutes is well spent. The student will return to the drill and repetition refreshed by the break and more interested because he can identify more fully with the experience of the character in the book. (2) Much useful language experience can be gained from target-language discussion of slides, their physical aspects for the near beginner and their significance or emotional impact or symbolism for the more advanced student. All need not be lost!

Now, bearing in mind that culture wears many faces and is inextricably bound to the language-learning process, how can you go about building your resources for this type of teaching? I would make the following suggestions if you absolutely cannot travel this year to a country where your target language is spoken:

(1) Read and study--books on the history, art, government, social problems, and the psychology of your subjects.

(2) Build up your school's library resources as fast as funds allow. This should include well-illustrated books for your own use and readable, interesting books in English as well as in the target language to spark your students' interest. There are always worthwhile classics, but the collection should be kept up to date so that the culture that is being absorbed is not that of twenty years ago.

(3) Develope a file of pictures and clippings and organize it so that you can find what you need when you need it.

(4) Have your school invest in the Sunday supplement of a foreign metropolitan newspaper in the language. Use it for browsing and special reports in your classes, then mount typical articles that show the various facets of family life (engagement parties, weddings, baptisms, first

communions, death notices, sports, social affairs, school functions, etc.). When the question of Spanish family names arises, for example, you have pictures of family groups that prove the point. The flowery newspaper language is a constant source of amazement--and increasing understanding of Spanish or Spanish American temperament. You could talk about these phenomena for hours without half the effect!

(5) Make use of the cultural resources your community offers. When a returned missionary or an exchange student visits your classroom and speaks the target language, your students may really realize for the first time that this is not just a language requirement but a way of life somewhere in the world. The gestures they make so naturally and the easy flow of words have an impact that all your explanations can never achieve unaided.

If you are traveling or studying in a country where the target language is spoken you can really have a ball. First of all equip yourself with a good camera and learn to operate it proficiently. (Slides are easiest to show and discuss.) Be selective and discriminating in what you photograph and be ruthless in weeding out the poor shots and those that have no message. A few scenic pictures help set the stage, but basically your students will be more interested in people--especially people in action: gesturing old men, children at play, mini-skirted girls. Think in terms of little units--perhaps only five or ten slides to a unit, perhaps more. Some suggested topics might be

Educations
Childhood games and activites
Entertainment
Various craft processes
Housing--all types
Family life--perhaps a series on a particular family
Festivals
Religious ceremonies
Transportation
Cities, towns, and villages

I do not mean that you should complete one category before going on to another, but this should be your ultimate type of organization. Take the pictures when you can get them!

You may have to reach outside yourself a bit to achieve success in some of these categories. Take the education unit, for example. Most school administrators are gracious to a foreign teacher who wants to know more about the educational system--even a teacher with a camera! Try making contact with schools on various levels, public and private. Visit classes; take notes; <u>know</u> something about the system, its strengths and weaknesses. Your students will be fascinated when your answers to their questions are bolstered by on-the-spot photographs. The experience can't do your language proficiency any harm either. If you are using a text that makes reference to certain places or historical characters or writers, don't miss an opportunity to photograph those places or anything connected with the character or writer.

Be careful to present a <u>fair</u> picture of the country--not too many quaint, picturesque Indians or slum areas; not all luxury hotels like the travel folders. Show it like it is. Traveling with a camera and an objective is like traveling with a sketch pad. It is worth the inconvenience because you are so much more aware of what goes on around you.

Don't let shyness limit your conversations to ordering breakfast and shopping for souvenirs. Talk to people from as many strata of society as possible. Find out what they think about the future of their country and what the economic problems are--both personal and general. Especially find out what young people are thinking and doing and how their values and interests differ from or are similar to those of your students. To what extent are social customs changing? Don't depend on one informant for this; family differences as well as economic class make this a fascinating problem.

In selecting realia try to avoid the trite, the stereotypes, and the touristy. Again think in terms of little units--of small, often seemingly unimportant items that tell of a different way of life. Crafts are beautiful and fascinating. They can be a real pride-builder if your students are second generation Americans. On the other hand they may sometimes be of less cultural significance than an unusual kitchen utensil (say a buñelo iron in Mexico) or a movie hand bill, or a tube of toothpaste. Costumes and well-made dolls or local-type figures have a story to tell, but again a word of caution about leading your students to think that the picturesque is the norm. Comic books and typical magazines are good buys. Typical textbooks tell a lot about the educational system as do actual student notebooks. Don't overlook games, especially the bingo- and parcheesi-type game that can be used for club meetings. Once you are alert you will see endless possibilities.

If you are electronically oriented a tape recorder can be interesting. Record the sounds of a religious <u>fiesta</u> to accompany your series of slides on that subject. Record a conversation with a student on university disturbances. Record the views of a group of girls on how much dating freedom they have or think they should have.

In short, the more you know about a country the more you can convey to your students at a moment when it fits in naturally and normally. The more documentation you are able to provide in the way of pictures and tapes and realia, the more authority (and motivation) your discussions provide your students. Cultural orientation is as worthwhile as it is unavoidable.

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